

**SPEECH BY
HIS EXCELLENCY
MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC CVO MC (Retd)
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE
COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
AT THE ROYCE ABBEY ORATION DINNER
BRIGHTON, VICTORIA
THURSDAY, 22 APRIL 2004**

Tonight's honouree, Mr Royce Abbey and his wife, Jean, Governor, Rotary District 9800, Mr Don Jago and Mrs Margery Jago, Past Governor, Rotary District 9800, Mr John King, and Mrs Elaine King, Past officers of Rotary International, Rotarians, Ladies and gentlemen

Good evening to you all, and thank you so much for inviting me to deliver this inaugural Royce Abbey Oration.

Marlena and I are delighted to be among Rotarians again, whom we invariably find to be both enjoyable and inspiring company.

Tonight has been no exception.

We're here, of course, to honour a particularly great Rotarian – a man of incredible energy, achievement and vision – Mr Royce Abbey.

In addressing the first of what we hope will become an annual dinner, I'd like to talk about how we might foster and recognise – in the broader community – some of the qualities Mr Abbey has demonstrated, and imbued in others, over the years.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Royce Abbey has given half a century of his life to Rotary.

When – as President of Rotary International – he came up with the theme “Put Life Into Rotary – Your Life”, he wasn't asking people to do anything he hadn't already done himself.

And – from my experience, including on the battlefield – that approach to life is a sign of fine leadership.

Mr Abbey really has lived his life by the Rotary creed of “Service Above Self” – indeed, even before he was a Rotary member.

He served in the Australian Imperial Force from 1942 to 1946, rising to the rank of Lieutenant and earning a Distinguished Conduct Medal.

He's held a plethora of Australian and international positions within Rotary – including that of Governor, President, Chairman of the Australian Health Research Fund, Vice Chairman of the International Polio Plus Campaign and World President in 1988-89.

Incidentally, Mr Abbey is one of only four Australians to have served as President of Rotary International.

Apparently not content just to work tirelessly for Rotary, he's been involved in medical research, the YMCA and the fight against child abuse, and he was a member of Essendon City Council.

As for awards, he's the holder of a Queen's Jubilee Medal for services to youth, and he's a former Victorian of the Year and Advance Australia Ambassador.

In regard to the Australian Honours System – about which I want to talk later – Mr Abbey was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1988 and an Officer in 2001.

Mr Abbey's great selflessness and capacity for hard work is obvious from my all-too-brief summary of his achievements.

And his many friends and colleagues talk warmly of his determination, outstanding leadership qualities and sheer get-up-and-go.

Mr Abbey, you are a truly great Australian and a superb role model for all of us – and you have been so actively and loyally supported in your work by your wife, Jean.

Marlena and I join everyone here tonight in thanking you for your splendid contribution to the community – especially your support of the most needy in this country and the world.

We wish you and Jean good health, happiness and continued success in your lives.

Ladies and gentlemen.

When we meet and hear about great Australians like Mr Abbey, our first thoughts are something along the lines of: "How can we find a way of minting this bloke!"

Well, I'm not sure that's going to be possible.

But, in Rotary, we do have a grassroots yet internationally networked organisation that continues – on the eve of its centenary – to encourage and carry out the most valuable of community service.

As with Mr Abbey, we often see the true measure of a man or woman by what they do for others.

As George Eliot wrote: "Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds."

Rotary has a proud history of achievement, and it inculcates so many important values in people – including initiative, compassion and self-sacrifice.

I've learned a great deal about the world and community service through Rotary, and I'm greatly honoured to be a Paul Harris Fellow.

Globally, Rotary has immunised more than two billion children against polio, sent 200,000 students on Youth Exchange programs, and granted 34,000 scholarships worldwide.

Here in Australia, our 37,000 Rotarians are involved in all manner of projects – in virtually every neighbourhood, suburb and town.

All of Rotary's work is valuable, of course, but I'm especially supportive of the efforts being made to help our most needy, such as indigenous Australians.

Rotary's Indigenous Health Scholarships, for example, are an excellent initiative – helping Aborigines to undertake a health-related course and then use the skills they've learned in their own, often remote communities.

Personally, I feel that helping indigenous Australians to improve their own health, education and self-esteem should be a high-priority goal in this country.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Generally, Australians are pretty good at volunteering.

About 4.4 million of us carry out some kind of voluntary work annually, averaging 3.1 hours a week.

I have to admit, though, that I have some concerns about our collective ability to produce

successive generations of community volunteers.

After all, as that great humanitarian, the late Mother Teresa, once said: “To keep a lamp burning, we have to keep putting oil in it.”

As some of you may know, I also share Royce Abbey’s deep interest in youth – particularly their intellectual, moral and spiritual development.

As a result, I’ve talked widely since taking up my role last August, about getting young people involved in well-led, well-structured youth groups.

I know these sorts of programs do provide kids with a sense of purpose, direction and belonging.

Youth groups have a proven record in reducing juvenile crime and drug usage rates, and they can be a powerful tool in terms of improving future job opportunities.

It also seems to me that today’s youth – contrary to some misconceptions – are actually quite keen to get involved in community projects.

I think the real trick is, firstly, to convince them that it’s “cool” to join a group and, secondly, to ensure they’re aware of the range of youth programs on offer.

On this latter point, I put forward a proposal around Australia Day to set up a special national youth group web site that gives youngsters, their mentors or support agencies, a chance to see what’s available in their local area, how they can join, and so on – whether it’s Scouts, or surf life saving, or Green Corps or Rotaract.

I hope that some organisation – perhaps a forward-thinking IT firm – will pick up this ball and run with it at some point over the coming year.

Perhaps it’s a concept Rotary could support, and I would certainly be very happy to discuss this in more detail if Rotary so wished.

By the way, as Chief Scout, I’m aware of the plans the Scouting movement has to recruit youngsters by modernising its image and explicitly urging kids to put aside their video games and DVDs in favour of more practical, physical and sociable activities.

Obviously, I want young people to gain immediate benefit from taking part in youth groups or programs.

But there’s another, more long-term purpose behind my approach – that is, for young people to be bitten by the community service “bug” early in their lives, so that they might become Australia’s essential volunteers of tomorrow.

Of course, I needn’t oversell the youth group idea to Rotarians.

You already foster youth directly through Interact and Rotaract, and ultimately about 60 per cent of your efforts in Australia assist some form of work with young people.

Still, I’d encourage you to continue to bring as many youngsters into the Rotary “tent” as possible.

So many people have had such wonderfully positive experiences with Rotary when they’re young – especially as Exchange Students.

I wonder whether there might be ways of keeping your Exchange Students and others engaged with Rotary throughout their early working days “on the books”, so to speak – perhaps through junior-level membership – so that they can eventually aspire to becoming members of Rotary, proper.

Ladies and gentlemen.

I've talked, so far, about fostering the ethic of service, and the tangible difference good people such as Rotarians make to the lives of their fellow citizens.

I want to close, this evening, with a few thoughts on how we might better recognise the efforts of those community workers – the Royce Abbays of this world.

One of the great joys and privileges of my job is the opportunity it affords to meet so many wonderful people who are working diligently – but usually without great fanfare – for the good of their local communities.

Marlena and I have met with and helped support, for example, Meals on Wheels and Legacy volunteers, those helping abused and disabled children, and people dealing daily with the terrible results of HIV/AIDS.

Part of the imperative of finding successive generations of volunteers is not just encouraging people to contribute something, but also properly recognising and rewarding them when they so do.

This may be a bit controversial, but I do question sometimes whether Australians, generally, are losing sight of what constitutes a good community role model.

I do feel that the labels “hero” and “great Australian” are thrown around a little too liberally these days.

In a pervasive worldwide celebrity culture, some people seem too eager to model themselves on entertainers, sporting stars and others who are simply “famous for being famous” – “well-known for their well-knownness”.

I'm not trying to downgrade anyone's legitimate achievements in public life.

But I am suggesting we might give greater – and due – recognition and publicity to the truly unsung heroes of our society who, I'm sure, many of you see every day.

With today's frequent emphasis on trivia and tragedy, I would strongly suggest that the media has an important role to play in this public acknowledgement.

Indeed, after I talked about this issue at a recent business breakfast in Perth, the local West Australian newspaper launched a lengthy campaign to highlight local heroes – which I thought was an encouraging first step.

But what I am alluding to, in particular, is the Australian Honours System.

I feel that that System – which includes Bravery Decorations and the Order of Australia – has served us very well since it was instituted in 1975.

Nevertheless, aspects of the System could be improved.

I sense, for example, that some professions and sectors – especially volunteer and community groups – are somewhat under-represented in the Australia Day and Queen's Birthday Honours Lists.

I hope that Australians will consider more closely the efforts of those selfless, modest and hard-working members of the local community and then submit a nomination for them to receive an Honour – just as someone did, twice, for Mr Abbey.

After all, if people aren't nominated, they can't be considered for an award.

I also hope that we might better publicise the Order of Australia and what it represents.

Maybe we can put up the beautiful colour poster at each local council office that shows all of the awards, and make nomination forms readily available from these offices.

Perhaps each State and Territory could have a representative who explains to school, community, business and regional groups, the purpose and value of the Honours System.

I think all of these initiatives – whether they're through the media, the Honours System or simply word-of-mouth – can help us more effectively acknowledge truly exceptional citizens and, in turn, foster a greater sense of community and service in Australia.

Ladies and gentlemen.

In acknowledging the wonderful work of Royce Abbey and all Rotarians, I have tried to throw in a few ideas on youth groups, databases, mentoring and service recognition for you to think about.

As always, it's been a great pleasure spending time with Rotarians and hearing about your latest local initiatives.

Marlena and I commend you for your excellent work and we wish you all the very best in your shared and individual endeavours.

Most of all, we congratulate Royce Abbey on a virtual lifetime of significant contribution to Rotary in Victoria, Australia and throughout the world, and we thank Jean again for her loyal and loving support.

Finally, I want to thank all of you Rotarians for your ongoing and splendid efforts to help build peace, prosperity and goodwill – nationally and internationally – and to create community wealth and opportunity in a complex, rapidly changing and challenging world.

Thank you and well done to you all.